

County and Regional Office Study
September 18, 2002
Presented to
Dr. William Librera
Commissioner of Education
State of New Jersey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Education has, in the past six months, undergone what is characteristic of all healthy organizations. We examined carefully all aspects of our mission, including the roles and responsibilities of all people employed in the department. We have consolidated, altered, added and, where necessary, eliminated positions. Though the budget deficit has in a number of ways accelerated this process across all government levels, our review would have occurred without such a budget requirement, and we believe with the same likely results because our first objective was to reexamine and to reconstruct what was necessary to provide leadership for education in New Jersey.

The result of our review, that now includes the county offices, has produced an overall reduction of approximately 15 percent—meeting our budget requirement, though important, was second beyond the primary requirement of continuous improvement. The percentage of 15 percent in real terms for the department is higher because we did not touch any part of the Katzenbach School for the Deaf, and they represent approximately 20 percent of our overall staff.

We embrace the need to do business in different ways and that to us translates into doing our business better. We also embrace the credo of action and answers that come from an organization that is designed to be responsive and resourceful. Layers of bureaucracy have been replaced by roles across departments and divisions. Just as our challenges are different in 2002 than in the past decade or two, so must be our department.

Additionally, the recently enacted No Child Left Behind federal legislation signed into law on January 8, 2002 essentially redefines K—12 education by mandating: the expansion of the scope and frequency of student testing, revamping accountability systems, ensuring qualified teaching staff, demonstrating progress year to year, closing the achievement gap and implementing research based approaches to improve school quality and student performance. This new law poses a daunting challenge and tremendous opportunity for the educational systems in New Jersey. The challenge lies in not only our ability to raise student achievement, but to deliver high-quality education programs and services, with a recession sapping state tax revenues. The opportunity presented is to develop strategies for improving the use of educational resources and restructuring service delivery systems.

The education program delivery in New Jersey and nationwide is in a substantial period of transition. Accordingly, efforts must be directed at ensuring an infrastructure is in place to meet the new demands the law requires by early fall of 2002.

At the state level, the department of education is engaged in a program of continuous improvement that seeks operating and organizational changes to improve service quality while containing costs.

In February 2002, the department reviewed its overall operation and organization and its relationship to school districts by identifying organizational and operating strengths, as well as opportunities for improving service delivery to the field. As a result of this review, the department was reorganized into two functional areas—central operations and field operations. A series of models for fine-tuning the organizational relationship between the department and school districts were developed. Several programs and services were identified for potential divestiture.

The first phase of our reorganization put more of an emphasis directly into our three regions and defining the role of our Abbott Division. We are using technology and systems more. People are often asked to work beyond specific roles so we can make corrections as necessary and join together when circumstances, forces require us to do so.

A parallel study of the current field organizational relationship between the department and school districts was undertaken to determine if any modification was warranted. The scope of the study included an analysis of the existing operations and organization of the 21 county offices. It did not include an evaluation of the performance of any employee. It was determined that the county offices should not be viewed as an entity apart, but rather as an integrated component of the regional office design. It was also determined that a shift away from the emphasis on compliance and oversight must be made and emphasis should be placed on support and technical assistance.

Specific tasks included:

- Review and assembly of over 160 written comments;
- Interviews with state and local staff, government officials, local education agencies and key managers;
- Site visits to County offices; and
- Formation of diverse constituent work groups.

The study was a collaborative effort of department staff, including the county office staff, district superintendent and administrators, community college presidents and county government officials, such as freeholders and county executives. The process was structured to look at the current design in relationship to the proposed redesign of regional offices. Findings indicate:

First, government needs to be more responsive. With over 600 school districts, it becomes more apparent that one Assistant Commissioner meeting the needs of 600+ districts causes undue delays and causing government to be stretched too far. The 21 counties each have a county office that is statutorily set up to provide services to the local education agencies (LEAs). Instead of all the county superintendents and their staff dealing with

Trenton, county superintendents will be assigned to each Regional Office.

Each Regional Office will have the "final authority" of Trenton, thus bringing Trenton "into the field" and avoiding an added layer of government bureaucracy.

Second, government needs to become more equitable. If one district can have access to specialized resources, all should have common access. Regionalization will enhance equitable access to a broad array of shared services. One major component of Regional Offices is to have a Shared Services Specialist who can provide an umbrella of services for all districts.

Third, government needs to take into account geography and location of service. Population tends to influence service and access as well. For New Jersey to truly have an equitable system of educational support and assistance, the location of government matters for the time/distance/student population/number of schools algorithm for delivery of resources.

Fourth, the economy of scales of "brokering" services to larger numbers of districts would be beneficial. A major unit of the Regional Offices is shared services. There would be a concentrated effort for LEAs to collaborate in order to secure the best possible services and supplies, e.g., professional development, educational products, and services.

The structured part of the review was complemented by a series of facilitations and focus groups with Education Services Commissions, Audio Visual Commissions, and the County Educational Training Technology Centers. These sessions identified barriers to improved operations and service delivery, as well as suggestions to remove barriers and support for the establishment of regional offices.

County and Regional Offices Study

On June 5, 2002, Dr. William Librera, Commissioner of Education, presented to the State Board of Education his finalized plans to establish three regional offices and an Abbott Division to implement Department of Education policies and procedures.

Preceding this reorganization, a study was conducted to determine the vision and mission of these Regional Offices in relation to the County Offices serving the Northern Counties (Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Sussex, and Warren); Central Counties (Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Somerset, and Union); and Southern Counties (Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, and Salem). The study revolved around three components:

1. Written Comments: These were voluntarily submitted to the DOE from department staff, County Offices of Education staff, district superintendents and administrators, community college presidents and freeholders. The department received over 160 responses.

- Most written comments emphasized the services and support of County Offices, and therefore, requested that the Regional Offices' structure should not deter from this service and support of all 21 County Offices.
- Most provided a critical analysis of how the Trenton offices respond in an untimely or delayed manner.

- Many expressed the need to revise the certification process, the need to provide professional development and training, the need for the regional offices to be set up at a location which is in the region and conducive to support for the region. Human resources, technology/communications support and office functions and supplies are required. The Regional Offices should provide the support and services immediately in the field.
- Most expressed concern regarding the technological lag in Trenton and the need for a statewide database to reduce the redundancy in reporting.

2. County Office Site Visits: Dr. Albert Monillas, Dr. Judith Weiss, and Dr. Michael Rush visited every County Office to discuss with the staff how the Regional Offices could support the 21 County Offices.

- Staff agreed that a Regional Office would offer added support to County Offices in the areas of certification; technical assistance; grant review; fiscal assistance; professional development, and shared services.
- Staff agreed that a Regional Office structure would assist them in their daily routine allowing for greater continuity and administrative efficiency.
- Staff agreed that the current human resources of the County Offices could not meet the needs of the districts regarding monitoring, grants reviews, SRA process, charter school assistance, certification and budget reviews.
- Staff agreed that they all would like to resume an educational leadership role as in the past.
- Staff asked that the Regional Office study the structure and mission of Educational Services Commissions, AVA (Audio Visual) Commissions, and the County ETTC (Educational Technology Training Centers).
- Staff stressed the need for facilities assistance.

3. Work Groups: Various groups convened to discuss the direction of Regional Offices. In the South at Galloway Township, former county superintendents met on May 8, 2002. In Voorhees on May 2, 2002, district administrators from the Northern, Central, and Southern regions met. On May 24, 2002, Dr. Monillas met with the EIRC staff. On May 30, 2002, Dr. Weiss met with all the superintendents of the Educational Services Commissions. And on June 18, 2002, Dr. Rush met with 15 representatives of PAA (Personnel Administrators Association).

- All groups gave advice that there must be a consistent message to all regions from Trenton.
- All groups gave support to maintaining County Office structure and for Regional Offices to provide support to County Offices.
- All groups expressed the need for close ties with institutes of higher education, business partnerships, and collaborative services among districts.
- All groups are willing to work with the department and asked that department

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representatives attend meetings periodically and provide updates on topics of interest.

- All groups asked for close affiliation and coordination with DOE and noted close communication as necessary offering assistance.
- All groups were concerned with certification issues.
- All groups asked for a study of AVA Commissions, ETTCs, and asked how ESC/EIRC could work more closely with the DOE, as well as expanding their roles in brokering services.

The Education Service Commission Work group posed the following:

- The ESC transportation contracts (sometimes as many as 600) must be approved by the County Superintendent, despite the fact that the ESC's often do the training for the County Offices. Since superintendents have the statutory authority to approve transportation contracts, ESCs feel that it makes more sense for the ESC superintendents to approve their own contracts and (or perhaps the Regional Offices), then have monitoring to ensure protocol is followed.
- ESCs feel that they are regarded as a district rather than a larger service organization. Other states do insurance certification, food services, mentoring, etc. (California). There has never been a public endorsement of ESCs separate intermediate agencies or units. Competition is normally healthy.
- ESC Services –
 1. Computer services – Install networks, repairs, etc.
 2. Purchasing for municipalities & school districts (fuel oil, chalk and paper, telephone, internet, software, etc.)
 3. Transportation
 4. Alternative schools, Special Education, etc.
 5. Summer schools
 6. Professional training

Suggestions - From the ESC Superintendents

- Give the ESCs a "heads up" on what is "coming down the pike" where they might be able to be helpful.
- Encourage Abbott districts to look at the services the ESCs can provide.
- Division of Special Education must work closely with the ESCs.
- Recognize that the ESCs can work with the DOE to meet the goals established and request that the DOE use their facilities.
- Study third party contracting except transportation.
Ask to bring the national president of AAESC to Trenton to present an overview of what other services ESCs in other states provide.
- Underutilization of ESCs

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Districts often ignore the financial incentives with using the ESCs because business administrators often have relationships and receive "perks" from vendors. Also, the relationship with the County Offices is good, but often redundant.

- In the special education self-assessment, districts are supposed to be asked by the County Superintendents if they checked with the SCC, ESC or other public schools prior to placing students in private facilities. This process is not done. The County Superintendents need to insist that schools look first at the current approved public programs.

OVERVIEW OF PROPOSED REGIONAL OFFICES AND STAFF

After a review of the input of these three processes, members of the Department of Education laid out how Regional Offices could be most efficient, effective and responsive to the needs of County Offices and local districts.

The five Central Functions of the Department of Education (Compliance; Finance; Implementation of Abbott Decisions; Student Services; and Educational Programs/Assessment) revolve around compliance, policy-making, regulations and assistance. These five Central Functions find their actualization in the field, i.e., local educational agencies (LEAs). Bringing the Central Functions closer to the districts is the function of the Regional Offices.

The three Regional Offices (North, Central, South) support County Offices directly by bringing Trenton "into the field" and local educational agencies (LEAs) indirectly. Direct support of these Regional Offices means a more responsive government.

Each of the three Regional Offices will have various service units. These service units will have the "final authority" of Trenton to be the decision makers of the Central Functions. These Regional Offices will not be an added layer of bureaucracy.

The various service units of each Regional Office are:

	North	Central	South
Literacy/Standards/Assessment Specialist	2	2	1
Fiscal/Transportation/Shared Service Specialist	1	1	1
Facilities Specialist	1	1	1
Innovation Programs/School Specialist	1	1	1
Professional Development Specialist	1	1	Vacant
Grants Specialist	2	1	1
Certification/Examiners	3	3	2
Secretarial Support Staff	TBD	TBD	TBD
Assistant Commissioner or Designee	1	1	1

An Assistant Commissioner or other Commissioner Designee will lead each Regional

Office. Each Regional Office will assist and oversee six to eight county offices. Each Regional Office shall also have an affiliation with the school districts, educational services commissions, charter schools, institutions of higher learning, and also the communities and governmental bodies in which these agencies reside.

Fiscal/Transportation: This office shall link the Director of School Funding, Director of Fiscal Review, and Director of Transportation with the Regional Offices. This service unit will assist the County Business Administrators in all fiscal functions, policy and planning. This service unit will provide coordination for shared services.

Facilities: This office shall link the Director of Facilities and Director of Facilities Review with the Regional Offices and will support district facilities managers. This service unit is already operational on a regional basis.

Literacy/Standards/Assessment: This office shall link the Director of Academic/Professional Standards, the Director of Early Childhood, and the Director of Evaluation and Assessment to the Regional Offices. This service unit will coordinate the efforts of the County Educational Generalists, Reading Coaches, Curriculum Directors and Project Coordinators.

Innovation Programs/Schools: This office shall link the Director of Innovation Programs and Schools with the County Offices and Charter Schools. This service unit shall assist LEAs and private entities with best practices and innovative programs/schools.

Professional Development: This office shall link all the offices in Trenton with the Regional Offices and the County Professional Committees. This service unit shall provide a link between professional associations, institutions of higher learning, and approved providers to County offices and school districts in order to further the "teaching and learning" mission.

Grants: This office shall link the Director of Title I, the Director of Grants Management, the Director of Program Support Services and other grant programs with the County Offices in order to assist local educational agencies.

Certification: This office shall link the Director of Licensure and Credentials to the Regional Offices who will assist the County Offices and institutions of higher learning with individuals in need of certification and mentoring.

Secretarial Staff: This function will support the needs of the Regional Offices.

Assistant Commissioner or Commissioner Designee: This office will oversee each Regional Office and will maintain direct contact with the Commissioner, the Assistant Commissioner for Abbott Implementation, the Assistant Commissioner for Finance, the Assistant Commissioner for Educational Programs/Assessment, the Assistant Commissioner for Student Services and the Chief of Staff and the Deputy Commissioner. They will also assist and supervise the County Superintendents. Finally, they will articulate and communicate with each other to ensure equity and consistency.

Additional Staff: Under needed circumstances, the following staff may be employed to perform duties in their scope:

- PIRC Staff: These staff members may reside in the Regional Offices where space is available. The supervision of the staff shall remain under the Director of Program

- Special Education Monitors: These staff members may reside in the Regional Offices if space permits. However, the supervision of the staff shall remain under the Director of Special Education
- Others: As may be assigned.

The Regional Offices will act as:

- Advisors of the policies and procedures of the divisions of the Department of Education
- Primary conduits for County Offices to the DOE divisions
- Advisors for outsourcing of professional development, pre-service, training, mentoring, etc.
- Certification officers
- Coordinators for Shared Services
- Assistance providers to County Offices

Recommendations

The Department of Education is in full support of the County Offices!

As a result of feedback from the county offices and field administrators, we believe in the continuing function and need for county offices to service the needs of our schools. However, due to variations in the size and unique needs of each county, as well as statutory requirements for the County Superintendents, they are constrained from providing equitable and quality service to all of the schools in New Jersey.

For example, the same number of professional staff members in each county office service from 78 districts in Bergen County to 11 districts in Mercer County, and 123,308 students in Bergen County to 11,857 students in Salem County. This inequity must not continue if we are to serve all the children and school districts in New Jersey in the same manner.

The question then is what is the best structure to deliver quality service in each county, and what the roadblocks are. There are several approaches to resolving this issue which are consistent with the department's mission of examining multiple paths to achieve success:

1. Review the statutory and regulatory obligations of the County Superintendents in order to prioritize the value each requirement has to the education of NJ children, and/or any conflict of interest posed.
2. Have some County Superintendent serve in a dual role – e.g. County Superintendent and County Business Administrator (Mercer and Union are currently functioning this way.)
3. Have County Superintendents serve more than one county in areas where population is significantly smaller. (Salem and Cape May Counties.)
4. Reexamine the compensation package for County Superintendents in order to attract

and retain quality staff who are fairly remunerated for their responsibilities.

To that end, the Regional Offices will provide and are providing support to the County Offices in the following ways:

1. Statewide planning: The Regional offices will devise short and long range planning as needs are developed from the local education agencies.
2. Seamless system P – 14/16/20: The Regional offices will develop plans on how K-12 districts can work more cooperatively with county colleges and four years institutes of higher learning in order to more effectively address the continuum of education from preschool through college.
3. Shared services: The Regional offices will provide the means to seek joint efforts for local education agencies to assure equity and cooperation for purchasing and providing services.
4. County AVA Commissions, ETTCS, ESCs: The Regional offices will study how AVAs, ETTCS, ESCs can be better utilized and provide services to the schools.
5. Regional offices will have certification examiners in each region to work with and coordinate the efforts of the County offices.
6. Regional staff will provide support to the Counties in identifying effective programs, as well as providing technical assistance in problem areas.

In summary, the Department of Education is completely committed to utilizing the regional and county offices to provide better support for teaching and learning in all of our schools.

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